

## **Extra Feature Story**

### **Graphic Warnings Proposed for Cigarette Packages, Ads**

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In a move that is the first of its kind in the United States, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has proposed new warning labels for cigarette packages that will feature visual images, such as a toe tag on a corpse, as a way to depict smoking's harmful side effects.

The new labels consist of illustrations and photos that are frank in their message about the dangers associated with smoking. Regulators at the FDA -- an agency within the federal government that promotes public health -- hope the new warning labels will encourage current smokers to quit and deter others from experimenting with cigarettes or any forms of tobacco products. Each year about 444,000 Americans die from smoking-related health problems.

"We want to make sure every person who picks up a pack of cigarettes knows exactly what the risk is they are taking," said Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius in a press conference earlier this week.

#### **Tobacco Act grants FDA powers to regulate**

Congress passed the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act in June 2009. This legislation granted the FDA the authority to regulate advertising, marketing and production of tobacco products in the United States. The act says all cigarette packages and advertisements must eventually have large, visible health warnings.

Prior to the act's passage, tobacco was one of the least regulated consumer products in the United States, even though decades of research proved its addictive and deadly side effects.

The Tobacco Act was primarily conceived as a way to prevent children from being influenced by tobacco companies. Specific advertisements, like Joe Camel or cherry-flavored cigarettes, were intended to attract young people to tobacco products but are now banned. Under the act, tobacco companies also cannot advertise their products as "mild" or "light."

Statistics from a 2008 report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration reveal that each day 1,000 people under the age of 18 become regular smokers and about 4,000 try smoking for the first time. In total, roughly 3.4 million teenagers nationwide are regular smokers.

"Americans can begin to truly kick the habit, with the full force of our laws marshaled to protect consumers, and especially our young people," said Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., a sponsor of the tobacco legislation.

#### **New labels add shock value to tobacco warnings**

Each of the 36 illustrated warning labels proposed by the FDA this week is aimed at showing consumers the harmful effects of smoking tobacco. By law, the labels must cover half a cigarette pack's front and back, as well as the top 20 percent of all tobacco-related advertisements.

Some say the FDA is seeking shock value with its illustrations, from blackened lungs filled with tar to yellow rotten teeth. One image even shows a woman blowing smoke into her baby's face.

"The evidence is that graphic labels do make a difference in enticing smokers to stop smoking," said Dr. Richard Hunt, director of the Nicotine Dependence Center at the Mayo Clinic.

Not all of the proposed images will be used. The FDA has commissioned a company to survey 18,000 smokers and deem which of the ads are most compelling and thus likely to encourage them to kick the habit. By June 2011, the FDA plans to narrow the list down to nine images, and by October 2012 all cigarette companies must carry some form of the chosen labels on their products in order to be able to sell them in the United States.

### **Cigarette warnings span the globe**

In 1965, the United States became the first country to implement laws requiring tobacco products to bear health warnings. Currently, cigarette packs sold in the United States carry a generic message that reads "Surgeon General's Warning: Smoking Causes Lung Cancer, Heart Disease and May Complicate Pregnancy."

Though the United States led the way in mandating health warnings on cigarette packages, 39 other countries have gone beyond generic warnings. Some, such as Canada, require tobacco companies to feature large graphics highlighting smoking's harmful effects. Some labels featured in other countries are considered more graphic than the ones proposed by the FDA.

### **A problem for 'Big Tobacco' companies**

With the mandated labels set to go into effect in the U.S. in less than two years, tobacco companies are already voicing concerns about how these labels will hinder their sales.

R.J. Reynolds, the second largest tobacco company in the United States, has filed a lawsuit against the label legislation. The company argues the warnings will block their brand, making it tough for consumers to distinguish their cigarettes from others.

Anti-smoking advocates back the legislation, saying it will cut smoking in the United States from 20 percent to 12 percent by 2020.

"This is going to stop kids from starting to smoke ... and it's going to give smokers a strong incentive to quit smoking," said Patrick Reynolds, the grandson of R.J. Reynolds who is the executive director of the Foundation for a Smokefree America. His father, along with other relatives, died from smoking-related illnesses.

- Compiled by Kurtis Lee for NewsHour Extra